In a series of interviews, recent graduates reviewed their undergraduate lives, particularly aspects of their approaches to and experiences of studying. In this interview, two students, known by their initials as RS & CN consider aspects of their introduction to higher education.

Interviewer: I’d like you to cast your minds back to the start of your studies, to the first few weeks after entering university, and to tell me what your impressions were – what you did, how you felt – in brief, how you reacted to the whole experience.

RS: Well, it was pretty much what I’d expected. They’d told us what to expect in the sixth form, so it wasn’t such a shock. Everyone had said ‘Take advantage of the early stages to get to know people, go to things, don’t stick with the people that you know or who you live with in halls.’ Having said that though – having had school and my parents telling me what to expect – it still came as a surprise. I caught myself thinking that this was not happening to me but to someone else.

Interviewer: Do you mean that the experience was a shock, even though you said it wasn’t such a shock?

RS: I suppose I do. There’s one thing being told something, told what to expect by your parents and teachers, but quite another to come to terms with it in reality. I felt that I should have been better able to handle it. Not that I didn’t handle it, but that, as I said earlier, I sometimes felt that it was all happening to someone else and happening out there.

Interviewer: So despite having a fairly clear idea about what to expect, the experience still came as something of a surprise.

RS: Yes, that’s it. You know, I don’t think that I’ve ever considered it – the experience, that is – since then. After those first few weeks things happened so fast, one after the other, I forgot about it and just got on with things.

Interviewer: Did you react in a similar way?

CN: No, no I didn’t. I was so surprised to be here at all. I thought that there must have been some mistake, that the papers must have got mixed up with someone else’s and that I was here under false pretences. I never dreamed that I would get into a place like this and, to be honest, I just hid away, stayed in my room and mostly kept out of the way.

RS: I remember now, you didn’t mix with other people, in fact it was well into the first term that I became aware of you. Did you really just stay in your room?

CN: Not all the time. I mean I had to come out to get food and go to classes and then there was work – I was doing between 10 to 12 hours a week in a warehouse, so I wasn’t a recluse, but I wasn’t very good at going out and meeting people. That happened when the teaching really started, but before that I felt I was on the outside of everything and it took a long time for those
feelings to disappear.

Interviewer: In different ways then, you both experienced something of a shock at the change from school to university?

RS: I suppose the difference was that I did know quite a few people here and we did tend to do things together a lot of the time.

CN: That’s one big difference. I don’t think I knew anything – well, I didn’t know anyone here before I came. It was all new to me, new place, new people and, don’t forget, I wasn’t sure whether I should be here in the first place.

RS: Did you really feel that there’d been a mistake in your application, that it got mixed up?

CN: Yes, I know it sounds stupid, but my predicted grades weren’t that good, they were OK, but my economics teacher was really keen for me to apply here, so I did. I did it really because she was behind me.

Interviewer: And your parents?

CN: Well, they didn’t know much about the whole business of going to university – I was the first in our family – so they relied on Mrs Boswell, the economics teacher.

Interviewer: And you made friends gradually?

CN: That’s right. I thought that, well since I’m here, I’d better make the most of it and get down to work. It’s what I was used to doing – I can’t pretend that studying has ever come to me easily, I’ve always had to work hard at it.

RS: Same with me really, but I think being part of a group of people who knew each other made it a bit easier for me. There was usually someone who you could talk to if you were stuck.

Interviewer: And did you use to talk about what you were studying?

RS: Looking back on it, strangely, we did. I mean strangely because most people think that university is all about drinking and having a wild social life, – I’m not saying we didn’t have some wild times – but most of the time we got on with the work of being students. There’s a lot to get organised, study, work – I mean paid work, yes, and a social life...

Interviewer: But you managed?

RS: Yes, it settled down fairly quickly and you got into a routine. It sounds boring to say it like that, but getting into a pattern helped.

Interviewer: And for you?

CN: Well, much the same, except that I wasn’t part of a social group at first. Once classes had started then I did seem to get to know more people and we’d talk about lectures and things over coffee, but the thing that you said which really struck me was the thing about getting a pattern, a routine.

Interviewer: Can you remember how you established that routine?

CN: Well, I didn’t have to do too much in terms of organising it because many of the decisions were made for me; you know, my timetable and when I could do shifts in the warehouse – those things were set, so I just worked around them. What I did do was to use a wall planner to plot out when assignments had to be handed in and work back to see when I should start planning...
RS: That sounds very organised.

CN: (Laughs) Well, it sounds more organised than it was sometimes, it didn’t always work smoothly, you’d get behind with something, or there’d be something which took more time than you’d thought it would.

Interviewer: But in general, you found creating a schedule made things easier for you.

CN: Oh yes, yes, very much.

RS: I didn’t have a wall planner, but I did use the scheduler on my laptop to remind me to start thinking about things that I had to do.

Interviewer: So, let me get this clear, both of you established some sort of scheduling, or planning scheme fairly early on in your undergraduate lives.

RS: Well, that’s one thing that I do remember they hammered away at us about at school. ‘Don’t leave it ‘til the last minute and make sure that you know things are coming up.’ That, I do remember and I’m glad that I did. It’s like they also said, keep your notes organised. Did you do that?

CN: Yes, well I’m like that. I like to have things in order. It’s a habit with me that I like to have my notes organised – I even go through notes after I’ve made them to make sure that I think I’ve got the gist of them right. I still do it.

RS: That’s another thing they told us to do at school – I’d forgotten that. Looking back I think they must have done a pretty good job preparing us for uni – it’s a pity that I didn’t remember it all.

Interviewer: But apart from some feelings of shock initially, the move into higher education was not a great shock for you.

RS: No, it wasn’t – it was just a bit strange at first despite everything that we’d been told.

CN: Whereas for me I think it was more of a shock because no-one told me things like your school told you. I was used to school where they told you what to study and when and even how to do it and I suddenly found out here that no-one was telling what to do, that I had to find a way of doing it myself. That was a shock.

Interviewer: Before we finish I’d like to just go back to the issue of social groups. Do you have strong feelings about their role in a student’s life?

CN: They’re important. I think that I’ve learned to value them more as time went by. I’ve learned to value those people I’ve got to know, but it took a long time and I can’t say that group is large.

RS: Yes, you’re right they are important, but on the other hand you have to be careful, there are dangers in groups you know. I’ve got friends at other universities who say that they won’t go to classes if their mates don’t go. They won’t go on their own – that doesn’t make sense to me.

CN: It’s following the herd.

RS: Yes, it is, but some people like to do that.

CN: I suppose so, but that’s not what university life is about, is it?

Interviewer: So, looking back over your undergraduate careers, what would
say to an incoming student?

RS  I’d say, be sure that you do what you want to do and not what others might want you to do. And, I know this isn’t cool, but it’s useful, try and remember what they said to you at school about coming to uni.

CN  And I’d say much the same, be aware of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. It’s very easy to say that at the end of three years, but it would have been useful to have realised it earlier on.